

BATH HERITAGE WATCHDOG

Planning Application No: 09/00576/FUL Hayesfield School, Upper Oldfield Park, BATH BA2 3LA

Bath Heritage Watchdog **OBJECTS** to this application.

This objection is based on the grounds of design, impact on the surrounding Conservation Area and the World Heritage Site, materials and issues such as illumination of the outdoor facilities. We have no objection to the principal of developing the site nor to the school obtaining the required facilities

Members of the Watchdog attended all the pre-application neighbourhood consultations and these were appreciated. However, despite some apparent willingness to listen and the eventual removal of the large areas of timber cladding and changes to other minor details, a number of our other criticisms have been ignored and the planning application does not represent a significant shift from the proposals seen before and therefore we must object based on the grounds above and for the reasons stated below.

Location

The school is situated in the Conservation Area and the World Heritage Site. Recent Government legislation affords WHS the same degree of protection as Conservation Areas. This therefore can be seen as a Conservation Area within a Conservation Area.

The Conservation Area character assessment on Page 4 states “... *there is a statutory requirement for new development to preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the conservation area ...*” This is correct but as will be seen below this proposal clearly fails to do this.

It is claimed in 6.21 on Page 11 of the same document that “... *the site itself is not prominent in the wider landscape, when viewed across the valley to the north or anywhere further afield within the conservation area and WHS ...*” This is highly inaccurate and misleading as the preceding paragraph, 6.20, states “... *there are fine views to the Georgian gems such as the Royal Crescent and also to the Lansdown ridgeline ...*” It would therefore follow that if you can see these locations from the school then this location will be visible from the Georgian gems. In fact, the site is highly visible from the northern slopes, The Shrubbery, Coromandel Heights, Lansdown Crescent and the Sion Hill area above the Royal Victoria Park are just some of the prime locations. At present, only the timber cladding jars the eye (because it is alien to its surroundings). The school hall is presented end on and the timber sports hall merges in due to its colour. The tall villas above the site follow the contours and are uniform due to their regular spacing and interspersed trees.

It is clear that the introduction of irregular forms dominated by highly reflective glazed areas will be highly prominent in views from within the Conservation Area and the World Heritage Site.

This is completely at odds with the statement 7.7 on Page 12 of the same document: “... ***the landscape report confirms that it is not prominent from long range views ...***” The view of the site may not at present be prominent but that is because although clearly visible, the buildings occupying the site are fairly benign. These proposals are not benign and could have a devastating impact on the views from afar. The site's relative distance from the Georgian and Roman areas is of no relevance: the whole city is a World Heritage Site.

The Conservation Area

“... there is a statutory requirement for new development to preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the conservation area ...”

In order to achieve this, it would be expected that any new proposal would take its cues from and attempt to reflect its surroundings both in materials and built form.

The Conservation Area Assessment 6.9 Page 9 also states that “... ***the density of the 19th century terraces means that there are no areas of extensive modern housing ...***” In fact, there is virtually no modern architecture in the area and the few modern infills have been specifically designed to fit into the locality. Therefore in order to preserve and enhance the character of the Conservation Area as stated above, a bold and aggressively modern design is not suitable. By its very nature, in order to include such large volume facilities and with no visual indicators or stylistic references, this proposal will have a severe detrimental impact on the Conservation Area.

Little or no reference is made to the fact that the biggest contributing factor to the site is not the buildings on the site (the main hall excepted) but the character style and finesse of the buildings that surround it. It should be these that are the driving force behind the design approach not the pursuit of ‘landmark statements’.

The site has clearly be taken out of its context in order to produce as Page 12 7.9 says “... ***providing a new civic building that can make its own coherent statement ...***” It is not a civic building, it is a school: its primary function is education not architectural statements.

Due to the absence in the planning application of any photographic reference or montage of the view across the city to the abbey from Upper Oldfield Park, it is not possible to ascertain the degree of impact or loss that this development will have on this viewpoint.

The biggest impact on the Conservation Area and WHS will come from the design and materials.

The Design

“How dare you suggest I remove my design statements!” (stated at one of the public consultations).

This was the response to our comments about certain unacceptable elements of the design. This led us to believe that the context of setting and of Bath was not to be a prime consideration and the following somewhat reinforces this.

The Executive Statement states it is “... *a robust and sympathetic design ...*” and is “... *responsive to the restrictions of the site and the significant heritage of the area ...*” Yet the Design & Access Statement says “... *the early 20th century suburban context of the locale does not provide enough visual indicators which could drive the detail of the design and from which the design might obtain a particular stylistic emphasis ...*” and the Planning Statement says “... *in a contrast, there is clear potential for the proposed new building to be more prominent and make its own architectural statement facing Lower Oldfield Park ...*”, “... *the design replaces this collection of buildings with one coherent approach, bold quality architecture and a street feature civic building enhancing the existing character of the Conservation Area ...*” and “... *the proposals are modern in design style. They are sensitive to their context, and will be executed in high quality external materials ...*”

How can the design be said to be sympathetic and responsive to the heritage of the area when another statement says (incorrectly in our view) that there are not enough visual indicators which could drive the design and provide stylistic emphasis? It is quite clear from the surrounding buildings and the main hall that earlier architects knew how to achieve this. No, the true driving force behind this design is the creation of a ‘landmark’ or statement building: all other considerations appear secondary.

The photomontages and drawings reveal the full impact.

Montage 1 shows the existing buildings removed and the largely open space replaced by a visually dominant building consisting of a series of stepped blocks with large cliff like walls of unadorned stone. To the left, a series of garage portals are topped by areas of glazing and the now almost compulsory balconies. Perched atop this is a form of roof with a grossly exaggerated overhang. The deliberately austere but locally important main hall is almost obliterated. This will utterly alter the character of the streetscene of Lower Oldfield Park.

Montage 2 shows the open sky and trees replaced with what can best be described as a missile silo, with its featureless wall pierced by louvered panels and camouflaged with trees. Utterly soulless. Peeking out above this is the unnecessarily tall entrance hall further obscuring the main hall.

No other montages are provided for further critical viewpoints so we revert to the drawings.

The west elevation shows the full impact of the sports hall and how its uninspired elevations and pre-weathered zinc panels are completely at odds with anything that surrounds it. Also seen is how the glazed canopy and roof line completely obscures the windows which are the principle feature of the main hall and its main source of natural light .

The north elevation presents a cascade of blank ashlar, zinc panels and window frames, glazed balconies and totally alien rooflines, all once again completely at odds with the finely executed masonry and proportions of the villas that stand above.

The east elevation consists almost entirely of glass and weathered zinc.

The biggest blank wall of all is reserved for the south elevation and the completely unnecessary glazed wall of the entrance that fails to harmonise with the main hall. The impact of the reflections from this glass on the dwellings opposite has not been considered.

The Planning Statement says “... *the architects have reduced the massing effect by working with the topography, and by breaking up the building into discreet elements, each with its own identity within an overarching uniformity of style. Cladding with louvers helps to humanise its scale. The roof form similarly works with the site topography and the overhangs creating shadow and silhouette effects ...*”

Large volume facilities will never be discreet and the overwhelming height of the entrance hall and other elements can hardly be considered human in scale. The roof form might work with the topography but fails to work with or respect its surroundings. Creating shadows is hardly appropriate for an educational establishment and the overhangs must surely impact on the light levels inside the building.

This is clearly a restrictive site and the wasted space in the floor plans indicate that these current proposals also represent a significant overdevelopment of the existing footprint.

Materials

“... *timber cladding is the new stone ...*” (stated to the Watchdog at a public consultation).

At least the architects listened and removed the timber cladding and increased the areas of Bath stone. However, the stone is being utilised in entirely the wrong manner. Bath stone does not respond well when used in this fashion: the large expanses of blank wall hark back to the ‘packing case’ architecture of the “Sack of Bath”, there is no form of fenestration or detailing to relieve the monotony. Throughout the whole scheme none of

the walls are pierced by windows, or even feature blind windows where the internal usage would find real windows inappropriate. The other principle material is pre-weathered zinc of a mid to dark grey in the form of panels and louvres. This is an utterly alien material that does not form or complement the Bath palette, its use here particularly on the elevations to the sports hall give an industrial feel the elements of the design. Last but not least, comes glass copiously used for banks of windows and balconies, predominately used for the entrance area and almost ignored on the south elevation. The stone and glass are not wrong materials, they are utilised in the wrong proportions. Glass when used on this scale and in the block form is highly reflective and will have a considerable impact on a low luminosity city and will also create considerable light spillage and pollution when the building is lit up at night. The zinc walling has no place in the Conservation Area or the World Heritage Site.

The Main Hall

Mention must be made of the main hall by A.J. Taylor built in 1936 as the main assembly hall. As the plans in the Public Records Office show, it is remarkably intact. Whilst it is austere and relatively plain, it does nevertheless have a certain restrained grandeur. It bears remarkable similarities to the Grade II Listed chapel of the Royal High School - a building started in the same period but finished at a later date. It must be considered locally important but is treated with utter disdain by these proposals, its principal elevation is obscured buttressed by a brutalist block of stone and zinc and its windows obliterated by the unnecessary glazed entrance. It will remove almost all the natural light from the hall. The unsympathetic treatment of this building needs addressing. The whole composition at this point does not sit well. We are also concerned with the removal of the existing steps (these should be retained). There is no justification for their loss and the insertion of windows at high levels.

Other Concerns

There appears to be an awful amount of open space in the interior this will be costly to light and heat, the visuals show a number of flights of stairs and galleries which could present access and health and safety issues, particularly in the event of a fire. We remain very concerned by the safety implications of the giant spiral staircase which appears to be more of a design quirk rather than serving any practical purpose.

The provision of outside sports pitches could necessitate some form of floodlighting, which would have as equally a damaging effect on the Conservation Area as the proposed design and calls into question the suitability of the location for sports facilities.

Conclusion

It is a shame that the overriding desire appears to be to create a landmark design full of architectural statements has led to the scheme proposed here. It sets out to be deliberately bold and aggressively modern in an area which the City Wide Character Appraisal commends for having “*such consistency in the built form*”. It eschews the set form and the local vernacular in its form and in the large scale use of uncomplimentary materials. The weak pretence that there is nothing to draw inspiration from rings hollow in a city world renowned for the quality of its architecture. What appears to be the poor utilisation of interior space and the retention and inclusion of such features as the ‘Heart’ entrance and spiral staircase has left a cluttered, haphazard, dangerous, bulky and unsympathetic design totally out of character with and paying no respect to its surroundings.

In its current form the application contravenes Policies BH1, BH5, BH6, BH7, D2 and D4 of the Local Plan and guidance contained within Planning Policies PPS1 and PPG15 and should therefore be refused.

Patrick Hutton
Chair
Bath Heritage Watchdog
9 April 2009